

Regionalism Redivivus. Do We Need a Closer Look?

session chairs: Ricardo Agarez & Nelson Mota



Regionalism has had an intense if unbalanced existence in architectural history. Eclectic, romantic, nationalist, historicist, critical, resistant – numerous titles have been used to position design practices that engage with local and regional elements, originated in both formal and informal custom. Among these categories, critical regionalism (CR) had widespread impact and, thirty years on, still influences architectural debate. Although critiqued and questioned, it has become an umbrella-term and a benchmark against which complex and diverse local practices are hastily asserted.

CR helped set the ground for a moralism of *good* and *bad*, *avantgarde* and *populist* use of regional features in design work – according to which *critical* is progressive, worthy of study and praise, while *uncritical* (eclectic, romantic, literal) is retrograde, and not equally relevant. This moral distinction and its insistence in binary oppositions bring about the ambivalent character of CR both as a “revisionary form of imperialist nostalgia” (Jacobs 1996), “often imposed from outside, from positions of authority” (Eggenger 2002), and as a theory reverent towards attitudes of peripheral challenge to central hegemonic power.

Notions of *negotiation*, *interchange*, *assimilation*, *hybridity*, and *contamination* linking modernism and regionalism have recently been introduced to complement the established view of *antagonism* between the two. More and more investigations show evidence of *conciliation* and blur conventional readings of *opposition*. The aims and ambitions of regions and local communities, however, remain hidden in generally centralized accounts. How were these formulated, and transferred to building practice? How were the cultural frames of metropolitan practitioners projected onto peripheral contexts? To what extent were local actors permeable to central agents?

We welcome papers that bring about discussion on the multiple facets of regionalism in Europe, and extend its boundaries. Regionalism studied in local sources or seen from the local standpoint, as well as constructed and issued from the centre. Regionalism observed in objects of the everyday built by locals, as much as in acknowledged works by central designers and agencies. Regionalism incorporating pastiche and nostalgia, familiar imagery and popular self-interpretation, discussed at the same level as cosmopolitan regionalism employing abstraction and exclusive references. Regionalism explored in its shades of grey, beyond the conventional black-and-white reading it has generally had from architectural history.

Grass Roots Modernism: The Austrian Settlement and Allotment Garden Association

Sophie Hochhäusl — Cornell University, U.S.

Due to housing and food shortages during World War I, the Austrian settlement movement emerged as a vernacular building enterprise based on the principle of self-help. In 1923 the scattered settlement groups comprising more than 50,000 members, were formalized into the “Austrian Settlement and Allotment Garden Association.” Along with this process of formalization the settlements became increasingly “modernized,” without ever abandoning their roots. This process of modernization was mirrored not only in modern architecture, but also in modern processes of organization. In my paper I would like to investigate the architectural and urban processes of transformations as well as the dialectical forces, “vernacular” and avant-garde, that shaped this movement into becoming not only a locally determined modern housing movement but an alternative approach towards life in the 1920s. Points of friction between high modern and local influences were certainly manifest in the architecture of the settlements; i.e. regional ornamentation was employed with cubic, functionalist row houses, and local materials were consciously manufactured into standardized parts with high labour efforts. But more importantly these seemingly opposed were also inherent in building processes and that economical organization, which shaped everyday life in the becoming of the settlements.

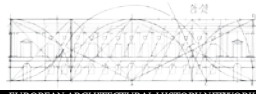
While core Modern architects like Adolf Loos planned for the Austrian settlement movement, the cooperative building of settlements enforced the notion of community. And while prominent economists designed the settlement association similar to a corporation with its own supplier of building materials and tools, these structures supported the settlers’ autonomy from the city.

In recent years, scholars have tirelessly worked on diversifying grand narratives of modern architecture since more varied categories to discuss modernism seem to be needed. In my paper I will investigate such categories specific to the Austrian Settlement Movement in terms of their departure from core modern ideas, ranging from their physical articulations of local economic and political practices.

Fale Samoa and Europe’s Extended Boundaries: Performing Place and Identity

A.-Chr. Engels-Schwarzpaul & Albert L. Refiti — Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

As the 19th century came to a close, British, German and American traders, bureaucrats and military rubbed shoulders in Apia, Samoa. Amongst them, they settled their imperial rivalries by contract in 1899: Western Samoans became



EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY NETWORK
PALAIS DES ACADEMIES

EAHN

SECOND INTERNATIONAL MEETING
BRUSSELS, BELGIUM 31 MAY - 3 JUNE 2012



German compatriots and were thus presented in 1901 at exhibitions in Frankfurt and Berlin. Thirteen years later, New Zealand (a member of the Commonwealth) took control of Samoa. Accordingly, a Samoan *fale* (house) was presented at the 1924 British Empire Exhibition in Wembley Park and, in 1940, at the Centennial Exhibition in Wellington. The *fale* exhibited in 2005 at the Tropical Islands Resort in Brandt (60km southeast of Berlin), next to five other indigenous houses from tropical regions shares some important features with its predecessors – despite obvious differences. The tension between local and global contexts and customs shaped conception, production and reception in all cases.

There is a dynamic awareness of many encounters with Europeans in Samoa today; not only are German and English genealogical links recognisable in many surnames, but a good share of tourists come from Europe to enjoy what might be called regional nostalgia. Historical connections, however, seem all but forgotten in Europe – who would think of Samoa as lying within Europe's extended boundaries? This forgetfulness might even explain some short-fallings in architectural theories of region, with their moral distinctions and oppositional schemes that seem oddly out of place not only in Apia. If conceptual "Europe" still dominates the world (Dietze 2008), its provincialization decentralises origins of knowledge and responsibilities (Charkrabarty 2008). Jacob's (1996) account, certainly expands the colonized's repertoire of available attitudes – yet it still remains reactive. Motivations, restrictions and desires find their way into colonial and postcolonial relationships of exchange from all sides, and they need to be given equal attention.

Our paper explores some instances in which houses were exhibited within the European imperial region. In these exhibitions, architecture's tectonic side was, as it were, inserted into the scenographic – an increasingly common strategy today, as more and more of the exterior is interiorized in glassed-over immunizing islands (Sloterdijk 2005, 2009). This twist, we suggest, helps avoid regionalism's (critical or not) focus on tectonic form and material and redirects attention to the processes and events that give rise to building. For instance, the dynamics spurring the use of iconically Samoan forms (decorative from a European perspective) raise different questions and suggest alternative concepts. If Critical Regionalism's rejection of eclectically "acquired alien forms" reacts in some ways to a condition of missed or avoided encounters, we want to ask explicitly who was and is involved in the acquisition of these forms, and how.

The paper draws on research conducted between 2006 and 2010 about the conception and production of the *fale* Samoa at Tropical Islands Resort. Archival research explored precedents of *fale* exhibited in colonial and postcolonial contexts; site visits, interviews and visual documentation explored the circumstances of contemporary projects. Our research suggests that migrating houses participate significantly in the performance of Pacific identities in the global leisure industries. They not only *signify* identities – they *per/form* them, often according to inconsistent or even conflicting sets of values. These practices, in Samoa or in the New Zealand or European diaspora, are deeply implicated in the tensions between the local and the global which a revived regionalism has to confront.

National Unity through Regional Diversity: Architecture as Political Reform in Yugoslavia, 1929-1941

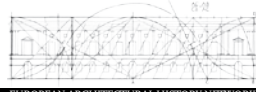
Aleksandar Ignjatović — University of Belgrade, Serbia

How can architecture make a process of complete political transition visible? How can architecture respond to a situation when a state obliterates its constitutive traditions and when not only ideological and political order, but also the very name of a nation is irreversibly changed? A fascinating example of the roles of architecture in such a process of political and ideological transition could be seen in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia after 1929 when the regime cast all historical traditions aside, including the name of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in order to defeat the nemesis of the 'national question'. The construction of the new, unified state was based on the substitution of national identity: newly-established departments (*banovine*), named after rivers like in the similarly turbulent France of the 1790s, replaced the existing historical regions; the new regions were deliberately chosen to erase ethnic and cultural differences and build a more homogeneous nation. Nowhere was such a re-invented identity more vivid than in architecture and its newly-established regionalist paradigm. This brief but wide ranging architectural history is manifested in a dizzying array of instances: from a series of typified projects for local post offices or schools which emulated newly forged regional styles, the strikingly emphatic idioms of nine governmental seats of the new provinces, to king Alexander I's summerhouses and resorts, scattered throughout the country. Echoing architectural discourse of the 1930s and the naturalization (as opposed to historicization) of culture, these images of Yugoslav regionalism unquestionably blur some of the traditional architectural oppositions—as between tectonic and scenographic—suggesting that architecture's ideological meanings lie beyond its 'intrinsic' values. Paradoxically, the architectural construction of the new paradigm relied on the steadfast interpretation of already canonized regional styles of historical provinces, rather than on a genuine reconstruction of the local site in vernacular forms. Nevertheless, it was exactly the incongruity of diktat-regionalism that reveals the hidden nature of the 1930s Yugoslav political reform, which eventually did not tame but empower traditional nationalisms of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

Africanicity and Colonial Architecture: the Response of the Colonial Planning Office (1944-1974)

Ana Cristina Fernandes Vaz Milheiro — Lisbon University Institute, Portugal

Can an official, centralised body produce architecture with a "regional" approach? The architecture of the Colonial Planning Office (GUC) in the former Portuguese colonies has been interpreted as a homogenous reflection of, and propaganda for, the *Estado Novo* regime. The GUC, created in 1944 by the Colonies Ministry, was a Lisbon-based design



EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY NETWORK
PALAIS DES ACADEMIES

EAHN

SECOND INTERNATIONAL MEETING
BRUSSELS, BELGIUM 31 MAY - 3 JUNE 2012



office commissioned to produce urban plans, housing for civil servants, facilities and infrastructures for the colonies. It would inevitably produce standardised architecture. For the duration of its existence, with three distinct phases until its closure coinciding with the revolution in 1974, its specialists perfected historicist architecture for official representation that was adapted to the Tropics.

In the early 1960s, the office's output began to compete with more localised experimentation, when the impossibility of transforming all of the colonial territories into an analogous expression of the *metropole* was acknowledged. Awareness of forms of "regionalism", albeit tentative, began to show in the reflections of the designers; this was also a result of the training they had received abroad.

One can identify two approaches: 1. The enormity of the rehousing task (providing housing for all social strata) and the specificities of the indigenous communities demanded responses that integrated traditional lifestyles and methods. In the urban plans executed (Mário de Oliveira, Bissau, 1959) there emerge (spatial and building) typologies based on the form and organization of the African house; 2. In the housing for European settlers references to traditional Portuguese architecture were incorporated as a way of helping people transferred from the *metropole* to the colonies to not feel uprooted. Thus, while in predominantly African communities more progressive design methods (from an international viewpoint) that respected the local identity were introduced, in European quarters a nostalgic discourse of transposition of an artificially re-created and, therefore, atavistic "regionalism" was maintained.

Regionalism and Neorealism in Modern Italian Architecture, 1925-1955

Jonathan Mekinda — University of Illinois at Chicago, U.S.

The powerful strain of regionalism latent in Italian modernism is by now well established. From the first manifesto of the Gruppo 7 in 1926, Italian modernists worked to develop a distinctive modern architecture that would not only embrace the formal principles of international modernism, but would at the same time be responsive to the particular geographical and cultural conditions of Italy and rooted in the celebrated architectural traditions of the country. Despite the significant body of scholarship devoted to modern Italian architecture, however, little attention has been paid to the full flowering of that strain of regionalism that only occurred after World War II in the architectural works now described as Neorealist.

Today, Neorealist architecture, exemplified by the Tiburtino quarter in Rome, is widely considered to embody Italian architects' abrupt turn away from modernism after the war in order to engage a wider audience through the scenographic appropriation of the forms and techniques of vernacular architecture. Contrary to this view, through an analysis of several key projects including the Cesate quarter in Milan and the Tiburtino quarter in Rome, this paper will show that Neorealist architecture was in fact the culmination of that search for a distinctively Italian modern architecture begun in the late 1920s. As such, it illustrates the centrality to the modernist project of concerns typically characterized as regionalism, particularly during the 1930s and '40s as modern architecture in Europe developed beyond the visions of its progenitors. Furthermore, this paper will also argue that the so-called "populism" of Neorealist architecture, a label typically used to deny it any critical capability, is properly understood as an explicit objective articulated by the architects in order to fashion a more intimate connection between the residents of these new quarters and the urban contexts in which they were embedded.

The significance of this paper extends beyond re-evaluating Neorealist architecture. More fundamentally, this study probes the relationship between modernism and regionalism and examines the fundamentally flawed distinction between avant-garde and populist regionalisms that is now widely accepted. As this paper will argue, this interpretative framework fails on multiple levels: Not only does it define the respective positions according to a limited set of formal techniques that does not reflect the full range of practices, but it also fundamentally misreads the political affiliations of those positions. As the Neorealist architecture of postwar Italy well demonstrates, the concept of regionalism embodies a set of concerns that cut across the boundaries of form and ideology typically associated with modernism.